

REVENGE OF THE UNDERDOG

The creators and writers of *Little Dog* make underdogs the pick of the litter

By Matthew Hays

As Joel Thomas Hynes tells it, his acclaimed series, *Little Dog*, comes from a very, very dark place.

"I could paint my walls with rejection letters," says the Newfoundland-bred and -born writer, director and actor. "I liked the idea of someone who is given a second chance. I've been given second chances."

Thus Hynes liked the idea of creating a character who had walked away from being a prize-winning boxer abruptly and dramatically, and then, years later, returned to face his demons after being lifted from obscurity. The little dog that provides the title of the show is played by Hynes himself, and his return to the public eye is a pretty funny gag in itself: he is chided by two men who recognize him in a parking lot. When Hynes punches them senseless, it's all captured by someone's cell phone, and the footage then goes viral on social media. Whether he likes it or not, *Little Dog* is back in the public eye as a fighter. The intervening years, we learn, have not been easy: Hynes faces down financial woes, taunts from his former opponent in the ring, and fraught family relations.

Little Dog has met with universal praise, and has found a good audience on the CBC, where it has been green lit for a second season. Its seamless pitch of harsh drama and dark comedy — things normally thought of as opposites — seem so perfectly concocted, it's hard to believe this isn't how Hynes originally

imagined the show. "I had some involvement with underground fighting," he recalls. "I liked the idea of an underground fighter who was returning to the ring, reluctantly. But I originally conceived of it as a one-hour drama."

Hynes is also honest about wanting to write a role for himself, the actor. "I had a strong desire to play a lead role in a TV series. I was tossing about different ideas for years. The characters I'm often cast as are often a certain type. I usually play degenerates or bad guys. As a performer, I was inspired to write a more neutral character."

It was Hynes' long-time friend and frequent collaborator, Sherry White, who suggested he mix up the formula for *Little Dog*. "I urged him to take it less seriously, to develop it both as a drama and a comedy," she says. "I also felt making it a half hour rather than an hour [worked]," she said of the half-hour, rather than an hour format. She felt it worked better for the series.

Hynes and White have a long history of collaboration, and that relationship is reflected in both the story behind *Little Dog* and the finished program. White co-wrote the 2008 screen adaptation of Hynes' novel *Down to the Dirt*, which he also starred in. (And that film, tellingly, also features a central character who must pick himself up and dust



PHOTO: CHRISTINA GAPIC



Joel Thomas Hynes takes to the ring in *Little Dog*.

himself off after hitting rock bottom.) They were also once an item, when they produced the ultimate collaboration — offspring (a son who is now 16). “We have a very good working relationship,” says White, who co-wrote and served as showrunner for season one of *Little Dog*. Part of her job as showrunner, was assembling a top-notch group of writers, which included: Cory Bowles, Adriana Maggs, Jane Maggs, Chris Roberts, Lisa Rose Snow and Kerri MacDonald.

“We’re the best of friends,” says White. “Joel really trusted me with this show, and you really need trust to do a show like this one together. Trust is so huge, and it is so rare. This show isn’t typical. We all had a lot of faith in each other in the writers’ room. It helps that I know Joel better than anyone knows him.”

“Sherry saw this as a late-night cable-style comedy,” recalls Hynes. “In terms of tone, we were looking at some of the U.K. shows, but also a show like *Atlanta*. The shows HBO are doing are remarkable.”

The show would also be unapologetically set in Newfoundland, but Hynes didn’t want the geography to define the entire show’s sensibility: “It is in Newfoundland, but we tread a fine line with that. I didn’t grow up in a tourism commercial, and I didn’t

want to create one here. I wanted to write the show set in Newfoundland, but also to have a national and international platform.”

The show’s tone, which shifts gears from pathos-to-comedy so brilliantly, is “probably the most important aspect of it,” says Hynes. “Upon a second viewing, some people have told me they see an entirely different show. That’s a great sign. It feels like it’s layered.”

“I felt like we didn’t have a lot of places to take a show like this,” says White. “The CBC was really good about appreciating where we were trying to go with it. It’s not a typical comedy, nor a typical drama. This show so easily could have been forced onto a comedy peg. They could have insisted we make it a lot more jokey. People still want that procedural hit. They want something that they feel secure audiences will instantly come to. A show like this might get good critical response, but audiences don’t always rush to them. So they’re still a risk. Knowing that the CBC was with us, that gave us great confidence to pursue the kind of high-wire act we were reaching for.”

In one of the show’s pleasingly odd moments, Hynes begins to jog vigorously on a sunny day, the visuals recalling Sly Stallone’s famous outdoor workout

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sequence in *Rocky*. But in this rendition, Hynes buckles over to vomit his guts out. He pauses, then continues in stride. *Little Dog* is built on jarring little moments like this, constantly shifting from hilarious to dark and back again. The consistent surprises and unexpected shifts are precisely what make the show so much fun to watch.

The fun part of the writing, says White, was “playing with the tone constantly. Sometimes we had to pull the gags back. Other times it feels like the right time to humiliate him. Is this the right point for him to get knocked over by a mic? It’s intuitive. And it’s also about trial and error. Joel originally saw this as very gritty, and that also came in with his musical choices. That we disagreed on; I felt we needed something lighter. But the disagreements we had worked out really well.”

Hynes agrees, saying “sometimes you just need to trust someone when they urge you to take a path you hadn’t at first considered. I had faith in Sherry’s vision for the show.”

White adds that “I really wanted to see a role for Joel, one which took him out of the usual places he’s in. It’s tricky, because of course he has all these tattoos and people see him a certain way. I was a bit squeamish about the early character description: is this really a time to put another male macho protagonist on the screen? But then we decided to bring much more vulnerability to the character. I don’t think the character wants people to see his more vulnerable side, but he does here, and it works.”

And while the role is one built for Hynes, he acknowledges it has many autobiographical overtones. “What the character goes through is not so far removed from my own career. I feel like there are times I’ve taken huge steps and then sabotaged things. I have realized it doesn’t get easier, it gets harder. I always felt like your ambitions should expand with your resume.

“I’ve tried to remain vital and active, doing music, writing, acting. I struggled for what seemed like a very long time to get my book published. It seemed no one was interested, and at times it felt like it was just over, like it would never happen. And then it [*We’ll All Be Burnt in Our Beds Some Night*] finally got published, and it won the Governor General’s Award last year. That’s why it wasn’t hard for me to imagine a character who was in a slump, and could see walking away from everything he’s worked for.” (The jury who chose Hynes’s book described it as “hilarious yet disturbing,” a tagline that could just as easily apply to *Little Dog*.)

And the down-and-out-but-not-quite-ready-to-surrender spirit of his central character is part of his rough-and-tumble childhood. “I’ve been told I couldn’t and never would. I’ve been told I was a waste of space. And I bought into it. I spent some years imagining I’d just go to jail. I come from a fairly dysfunctional background.

“The show rests on a question I often come back to: how compassionate can humanity be to the outsider?” ■